U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Albania

Advancing Freedom and Democracy Reports - 2008
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Part 1

The Republic of Albania is a transitioning parliamentary democracy with a population of approximately 3.6 million. Legislative authority is vested in the unicameral People's Assembly (parliament), which elects both the prime minister and the president. The prime minister heads the government, while the presidency is a largely ceremonial position with limited executive power. The government generally respects the human rights of its citizens; however, there are problems in some areas, including widespread corruption, societal "blood feud" killings, poor prison and pretrial detention conditions, security force abuse of prisoners and detainees, corruption, and human trafficking.

Part 2

Promoting democratic governance values and human rights is a top U.S. priority in Albania. The United States supports programs that foster a culture of lawfulness, strengthen the rule of law, and promote effective and accountable democratic institutions. This includes programs to support government efforts to root out corruption by building up oversight and audit capabilities; empowering civic groups, associations, and media to focus scrutiny on government operations; reforming the judicial system by increasing accountability and transparency; combating trafficking in persons; and nurturing the country's nascent civil society.

Achieving U.S. priorities will require a strong commitment by the government to a disciplined program of reform and concerted international support in close coordination with the European Union. U.S. programs seek to accelerate domestic reforms in law enforcement, democratic governance, and civil society. The United States also works to combat organized crime, corruption, and trafficking of persons, while promoting programs that assist the country in governing justly and democratically.

Part 3

The country continues to be stymied by corrupt and inefficient public institutions that engender low levels of public trust. In its second year of a two-year threshold agreement with the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the government is attempting to reduce corruption and improve performance of public procurement, tax administration, and business registration. An important outcome of this U.S. support will be the creation of an integrated "e-governance" system, which includes electronic procurement, online tax filing, and a system that allows businesses to register quickly and efficiently. The integrated system, to be handed over to a U.S.-supported local information technology agency in April 2008, will significantly improve access to information on government activities, thereby making the country's public sector more accessible and transparent and reducing opportunities for corruption.

Another important U.S. priority is promoting accountability in governance. U.S. assistance aims to strengthen audit institutions that monitor officials' assets and detect and deter conflicts of interest among government officials. An ongoing accountable governance program also promotes the consolidation of effective local governance by assisting city governments in tax collection and public asset management and by working to broker city-level public-private partnerships on local economic development plans.

Fostering participation in democratic life is crucial to U.S. efforts in the country and is a centerpiece of U.S. programming. U.S. assistance supports domestic observation of the electoral process, sponsorship of multiple public opinion polls and surveys by domestic NGOs, and financial assistance to NGOs engaged in advocating policy initiatives ranging from women's rights and justice reform to environmental issues. Sixteen community-based working groups will be established in two communes of the Diber region of northern Albania to contribute to setting the economic and social development priorities for their communes. U.S. assistance will also fund a new public information office for citizens of the municipality of Kucova, which will help promote transparency in local government by strengthening the relationship between citizens and their municipality. Early in 2008, 160 young persons from a Tirana neighborhood participated in community meetings and concrete activities such as public clean-up campaigns, which addressed issues related to improving local governance and community life.

Part 4

To combat human trafficking, the United States supports two large and comprehensive programs with a concrete focus on the preventive, humanitarian, and regional aspects of the trafficking of women and children. One program aims to strengthen the capacity and participation of civil society and local government actors in trafficking prevention as well as in assistance to and reintegration of trafficking victims, including through sub-grants geared to improve victim services and NGO-government coordination. In addition, the program seeks to improve collection, analysis, and use of data on trafficking in persons with the purpose of supporting policymakers and monitoring improvement in trafficking prevention and victim protection. Another U.S.-funded program supports efforts to identify better potential child victims of trafficking and to improve mechanisms for child victim protection with a view to preventing a resurgence of large-scale child trafficking in the country. The United States also supports implementation of a capacity-building program for police officers on child-friendly interview techniques based on respect for the human rights of the child.

Promoting the rule of law is a primary U.S. concern. U.S.-sponsored rule of law programs aim to increase accountability and transparency in 10 district and appellate courts by introducing case management systems and other advances ranging from publication of judicial decisions to better court information systems and training of court administrative personnel. The rule of law program will also assist in mobilizing civil society organizations and media to engage in effective court monitoring in 10 pilot courts. This U.S.-supported monitoring program includes sponsorship of annual surveys to measure the public's experience with the courts by highlighting access and transparency.

A final major area of emphasis for the United States is improving the criminal justice system to assist the country's fight against organized crime, especially against human and narcotics trafficking. U.S.-funded programs support efforts to propose and review criminal law-related legislation; train judges, police, and prosecutors; and offer expert assistance in establishing more effective law enforcement structures such as the Joint Investigative Unit, which is a team of prosecutors, police officers, customs officials, tax investigators, and intelligence agents that combat economic crime and corruption. U.S. assistance is geared toward building the skills and establishing the procedures necessary to improve investigation and prosecution of complex crimes such as economic crime and corruption. The U.S.-supported Legal Reform Working Group of the International Consortium, an international association of 35 organizations, facilitates U.S. coordination with a wider range of organizations involved in criminal justice work.

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